# VIGILS

BY ALINE KILMER

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# VIGILS

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## BY ALINE KILMER

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VIGILS
—A—

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TO

MY MOTHER

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# VIGILS

# VIGILS

## THINGS

SOMETIMES when I am at tea with you
I catch my breath
At a thought that is old as the world is old
And more bitter than death.

It is that the spoon that you just laid down
And the cup that you hold
May be here shining and insolent
When you are still and cold.

Your careless note that I laid away
May leap to my eyes like flame
When the world has almost forgotten your voice
Or the sound of your name.

The golden Virgin da Vinci drew
May smile on over my head,
And daffodils nod in the silver vase
When you are dead.

So let moth and dust corrupt and thieves
Break through and I shall be glad,
Because of the hatred I bear to things
Instead of the love I had.

For life seems only a shuddering breath,
A smothered, desperate cry,
And things have a terrible permanence
When people die.

## IF I HAD LOVED YOU MORE

If I had loved you more God would have had pity;
He would never have left me here in this desolate place,
Left me to go on my knees to the door of Heaven
Crying in vain for a little sight of your face.

How could I know that the earth would be dark without you?
For you were always the lover and I the friend.
Now if there were any hope that I might find you
I would go seeking you to the world's end.

"God is a jealous God. You have loved too wildly,
You have loved too well!" one said.
I bowed my head, but my heart in scorn was crying
That you whom I had not loved enough are dead.

I look on my heart and see it is hard and narrow,
That my loves are slight and last but a little space.
But why do I go on my knees to the door of Heaven
Crying for only a little sight of your face?

## ATONEMENT

When a storm comes up at night and the wind is crying,
When the trees are moaning like masts on laboring ships,
I wake in fear and put out my hand to find you
With your name on my lips.

No pain that the heart can hold is like to this one—
To call, forgetting, into aching space,
To reach out confident hands and find beside you
Only an empty place.

This should atone for the hours when I forget you.
Take then my offering, clean and sharp and sweet,
An agony brighter than years of dull remembrance.
I lay it at your feet.

## THE GARDEN

And now it is all to be done over again,
And what will come of it only God can know.
What has become of the furrows ploughed by pain,
And the plants set row on row?

Where are the lines of beautiful bending trees,
The gracious springs, the depths of delicate shade,
The sunny spaces loud with the humming of bees,
And the grassy paths in the garden my life had made?

Lightning and earthquake now have blasted and riven;
Even the trees that I trusted could not stand:
Now it lies here to the bitter winds of heaven,
A barren and a desolated land.

## THE NIGHT COMETH

My garden walks were smooth and green
And edged with box trees left and right,
An old grey sun-dial stood between
Two rounded bee hives, low and white.
My hollyhocks grew tall and red,
My larkspur thrust its lances high:
"The Night Cometh," the sun-dial said,
And I hated its wisdom and hurried by.

I watch the sun-dial as I wait
And hope to see its slow hand fly.
The stately poplars at the gate
Are funeral torches flaring high.
The scent of wallflowers breaks my heart,
The box is bitter in the sun,
The poppies burst their sheathes apart
And tell of rest when pain is done.

The hawthorn shakes a ghostly head
And breathes of death at fullest noon.

## Vigils

"The Night Cometh," the sun-dial said—
  The night can never come too soon.
O sun-dial, hurry your creeping hand,
  Let the shadows fall where the brown bees hum,
I watch and wait where the low hives stand,
  Let the night come, let the night come!

## THE TOUCH OF TEARS

Michael walks in autumn leaves
  Rustling leaves and fading grasses,
And his little music-box
  Tinkles faintly as he passes.
It's a gay and jaunty tune
  If the hands that play were clever:
Michael plays it like a dirge,
  Moaning on and on forever.

While his happy eyes grow big,
  Big and innocent and soulful,
Wistful, halting little notes
  Rise, unutterably doleful,
Telling of all childish griefs—
  Baffled babies sob forsaken,
Birds fly off and bubbles burst,
  Kittens sleep and will not waken.

Michael, it's the touch of tears.
  Though you sing for very gladness,
Others will not see you mirth;

They will mourn your fancied sadness.
Though you laugh at them in scorn,
Show your happy heart for token,
Michael, you'll protest in vain—
They will swear your heart is broken!

## SONG AGAINST CHILDREN

O THE barberry bright, the barberry bright!
It stood on the mantelpiece because of the height.
Its stems were slender and thorny and tall
And it looked most beautiful against the grey wall.
But Michael climbed up there in spite of the height
And he ate all the berries off the barberry bright.

O the round holly wreath, the round holly wreath!
It hung in the window with ivy beneath.
It was plump and prosperous, spangled with red
And I thought it would cheer me although I were
dead.
But Deborah climbed on a table beneath
And she ate all the berries off the round holly wreath.

O the mistletoe bough, the mistletoe bough!
Could anyone touch it? I did not see how.

## Vigils

I hung it up high that it might last long,
I wreathed it with ribbons and hailed it with song.
But Christopher reached it, I do not know how,
And he ate all the berries off the mistletoe bough.

## TO A CHILD SHUT IN A BEDROOM

O DEAR, O desolate bright head!
  O drooping mouth and shaken chin!
  How could I ever lock you in?
They were too harsh, the words I said.
Should I have only smiled, instead,
  At one small funny childish sin?
  Already my regrets begin.
What would I do if you were dead?
Yet there is wonder in that place,
  And I could show you, did I dare,
  How to throw back your tangled hair,
And in a round, mysterious place,
Looking upon your mirrored face,
  Find comfort in the beauty there.

## TRIBUTE

Deborah and Christopher brought me dandelions,
Kenton brought me buttercups with summer on their breath,
But Michael brought an autumn leaf, like lacy filigree,
A wan leaf, a ghost leaf, beautiful as death.

Death in all loveliness, fragile and exquisite,
Who but he would choose it from all the blossoming land?
Who but he would find it where it hid among the flowers?
Death in all loveliness, he laid it in my hand.

## VIOLIN SONG

The thing that I am seeking
I know I shall not find.
A wistful voice is crying
This sorrow in my mind.
I know I shall not find it
However far I go,
But I shall always seek it;
My heart has told me so.

Though I must always wander
I do not find it sweet:
There is no journey's ending
To draw my restless feet;
There is no distant vision
To help me on my way;
I know my quest is hopeless
But yet I may not stay.

The thing that I am seeking
Should not be far to seek;
I hear its haunting echo

## Vigils

Through every word I speak.
So I shall always seek it
Down all the roads I go,
But I shall never find it;
My heart has told me so.

## THE STIRRUP CUP

HERE where each road-worn one
Rests till the night is done,
  In the grey dawning I saw my horse stand,
And as I left the inn
With his smooth face of sin
  Smiling, mine host with a cup in his hand.

"Drink now, my merry friend,
Drink to your journey's end.
  Let not the hour of our parting be sad.
Follow what road you will
One thought will cheer you still—
  This warm and fragrant cup you shall have had.

"Traveller, the ride is sweet,
God speed your flying feet,
  Thinking you hasten to lover and friend.
Gather the bridle up,
Drain dry the stirrup cup,
  Only a cup of tears waits at the end."

## UNLEARNING

When I was young my heart was old,
  My heart was rich and very wise:
Now all its wisdom has been told
And all its wealth is fairy gold
  And all its joy futilities.

My heart would say, when I was young,
  "It would be well to grieve no more.
The griefs you sing had all been sung
Before you learned your mother-tongue,
  And all your tears been shed before."

When I was young my heart would say:
  "What childish things are these you seek?
The piper's price is large to pay
And there will come a reckoning day!"
  In this wise way my heart would speak.

But now it cries continually.
  It says: "None ever felt as you!

Cast prudence to the winds, and see
How happy I can make you be."
And some of what it says is true.

## PERVERSITY

All my life I have loved where I was not loved,
And always those whom I did not love loved me;
Only the God who made my wild heart knows
Why this should be.

Oh, I am strange, inscrutable, and proud;
You cannot prove me though you try and try.
I'll keep your love alive and wondering
Until you die.

## SHARDS

I CAN never remake the thing I have destroyed;
I brushed the golden dust from the moth's bright wing,
I called down wind to shatter the cherry-blossoms,
I did a terrible thing.

I feared that the cup might fall, so I flung it from me;
I feared that the bird might fly, so I set it free;
I feared that the dam might break, so I loosed the river:
May its waters cover me.

## CHARMIAN'S SONG

I'm glad I have but a little heart—
For my heart is very small—
It makes it free to come and go
And no one cares at all.

I give my heart for a tender word,
For a gentle look or touch,
And the one who has it never knows
And it does not hurt me much.

If my heart were great and I gave it away
Then all the world would see,
But my heart is only a little thing
And it does not trouble me.

I may give my little heart unseen,
It is so small and light,
And only very wakeful things
Can hear it cry at night.

## LIGHT LOVER

Why don't you go back to the sea, my dear?
I am not one who would hold you;
The sea is the woman you really love,
So let hers be the arms that fold you.
Your bright blue eyes are a sailor's eyes,
Your hungry heart is a sailor's, too.
And I know each port that you pass through
Will give one lass both bonny and wise
Who has learned light love from a sailor's eyes.

If you ever go back to the sea, my dear,
I shall miss you—yes, can you doubt it?
But women have lived through worse than that
So why should we worry about it?
Take your restless heart to the restless sea,
Your light, light love to a lighter lass

## Vigils

Who will smile when you come and smile when
you pass.
Here you can only trouble me.
Oh, I think you had better go back to sea!

## WORDS TO AN IRISH AIR

If I had a lover, now, who would he be?
Yourself with your laughter, your gay gallantry?
Yet I'd know when you kissed me your heart was not mine
But kneeling in tears at a lost lady's shrine.

Or if I should seek him who loves me too well,
Do you think with my head on his breast he could tell?
Would he know that however I strove to be true
My vagabond heart was still following you?

This dicing with hearts is a perilous game:
Be it one or another the end is the same.
There is sure to be sorrow however they fall,
So I think I shall not have a lover at all.

## FOR ALL LADIES OF SHALOTT

The web flew out and floated wide.
  Poor lady! I was with her then.
She gathered up her piteous pride,
  But she could never weave again.

The mirror cracked from side to side;
  I saw its silver shadows go.
"The curse has come on me!" she cried.
  Poor lady! I had told her so.

She was so proud: she would not hide.
  She only laughed and tried to sing.
But singing, in her song she died.
  *She did not profit anything.*

## "THE HEART KNOWETH ITS OWN BITTERNESS"

The heart knoweth? If this be true indeed
Then the thing that I bear in my bosom is not a heart;
For it knows no more than a hollow, whispering reed
That answers to every wind.
I am sick of the thing! I think we had better part.

My heart will come to any piper's calling,
A fool in motley that dances for any king;
But my body knows, and its tears unbidden falling
Say that my heart has sinned.
You would have my heart? You may. I am sick of the thing.

## TO SAPPHO, ABOUT HER APPLE

The highest apple swinging in the treetop
Fell in my two hands, eagerly uplifted.
For though I knew its height was half its fairness,
Still I would have it.

Now I am wise with centuries of wisdom.
I lift my voice to give your ashes comfort:
Sappho, the tempting fruit that hung above you
Was hard and bitter.

## TO AN INTRUDER

Because I show a guarded face
To all the world but one or two,
And in my heart's most secret place
Consider lilies, why should you
Whose roses grow in common ground
Profane the cloister I have found?

## TOUR DE FORCE

SMILINGLY, out of my pain,
I have woven a little song;
You may take it away with you.
I shall not sing it again,
But when you have learned it through
It will keep you brave and strong.
I wove it out of my pain:
There is not a word of it true.

## VIGILS

Once I knelt in my shining mail
Here by Thine altar all the night.
My heart beat proudly, my prayer rose loudly,
But I looked to my armor to win the fight.

God, my lance was a broken reed,
My mace a toy for a child's delight.
My helm is battered, my shield is shattered,
I am stiff with wounds, and I lost the fight.

Low I kneel through the night again,
Hear my prayer, if my prayer be right!
Take for Thy token my proud heart broken.
God, guide my arm! I go back to the fight.

## VICTORY

I SHEATH my sword. In mercy go.
Turn back from me your hopeless eyes,
For in them all my anger dies:
I cannot face a beaten foe.

My cause was just, the fight was sweet.
Go from me, O mine enemy,
Before, in shame of victory,
You find me kneeling at your feet.

## BOUND

If I had loved you, soon, ah, soon I had lost you.
Had I been kind you had kissed me and gone your faithless way.
The kiss that I would not give is the kiss that your lips are holding:
Now you are mine forever, because of all I have cost you.

You think that you are free and have given over your sighing,
You think that from my coldness your love has flown away:
But mine are the hands you shall dream that your own are holding,
And mine is the face you shall look for when you are dying.

## KNOWLEDGE

Some learn it in their youth,
  Some after bitter years:
There is no escape from the truth
  Though we drown in our tears.

Many die when they see
  That the terrible thing is true.
But it has been easy for me:
  I always knew.

## DAIMON

I saw her after many years.
The blue-black hair that had swept to her knees
Was dull and grey. No one would turn
To look at her thin face worn with tears.
I felt my own wet eyelids burn,
For she had been queen of my memories.

She had had a face as bright as the sun.
"Now she is broken and crushed," I said.
"The demon of mischief that lurked before
In her hazel eyes is beaten and done.
I hope we never meet any more,
For the thing I loved best in her is dead."

But then she turned and smiled at me,
And looking out of that mask of pain
The laughing imp behind her eyes

Was just as gay as it used to be.
That kind of a devil never dies.
I put her back on her throne again.

## ONE SHALL BE TAKEN AND THE OTHER LEFT

THERE is no Rachel any more
  And so it does not really matter.
    Leah alone is left, and she
    Goes her own way inscrutably.
  Soft-eyed she goes, content to scatter
Fine sand along a barren shore
Where there was sand enough before:
  Or from a well that has no water
    Raising a futile pitcher up
    Lifts to her lips an empty cup.
  Now she is Laban's only daughter:
There is no Rachel any more.

## THE HARP

I HAVE a harp of many strings
  But two are enough for me:
One is for love and one for death;
  And what would the third one be?

Before I learn another note
  I may forget and go,
So while my hand is light and sure
  I play on the strings I know.

## THE GIFT

He has taken away the things that I loved best
Love and youth and the harp that knew my hand.
Laughter alone is left of all the rest.
Does He mean that I may fill my days with laughter,
Or will it, too, slip through my fingers like spilt sand?

Why should I beat my wings like a bird in a net,
When I can be still and laugh at my own desire?
The wise may shake their heads at me, but yet
I should be sad without my little laughter.
The crackling of thorns is not so bad a fire.

Will He take away even the thorns from under the pot,
And send me cold and supperless to bed?

## Vigils

He has been good to me. I know he will not.
He gave me to keep a little foolish laughter.
I shall not lose it even when I am dead.

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